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AUTHOR Richardson, Richard C., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

The decisions that administrators make touch every facet of the institutional experience and fundamentally affect teaching and learning. Research shows, however, that administrators do not always recognize their influence, nor their responsibility for the quality of instruction. A study of one urban community college district revealed an unforeseen and unintended impact of administrative decisions in the classrooms, even though only 2% of the Chancellor's Executive Council's decisions over an 18-month period were concerned with instruction or curriculum. Illustrating this point was the Executive Council's decision to emphasize marketing activities. This approach succeeded in recruiting more nontraditional students, but the students' lack of adequate preparation limited their success in the classroom. To deal with the challenge of providing leadership to achieve the quality of education expected by the public and needed by students, administrators should: (1) emphasize assessment and mandatory placement to allow appropriate standards of performance without increasing attrition; (2) provide high quality advisement for students with degree or transfer objectives; (3) define exit competencies; (4) label transfer courses and restrict enrollment in these classes to students with the commensurate preparation and objectives; and (5) ensure that information sent to secondary schools does not present the community college as compensation for poor high school preparation. One important way for administrators to prepare for this challenge is to renew their knowledge of student needs, capabilities, and aspirations by periodically returning to the classroom as teachers. (EJV)

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HOW ADMINISTRATORS INFLUENCE STUDENT LEARNING

RICHARD C. RICHARDSON JR.
PROFESSOR OF HIGHER EDUCATION
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

PRESENTED AT A MEETING OF THE ILLINOIS COUNCIL OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS

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HOW ADMINISTRATORS INFLUENCE STUDENT LEARNING

Remarks to the Illinois Council of Community College Administrators

Richard C. Richardson Jr.
Professor of Higher Education
Arizona State University

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Champaign, Illinois

The decisions administrators make touch every facet of institutional experience. And so they affect in fundamental ways teaching and learning because that is the core activity in which community colleges engage. But administrators do not always recognize their influence on the quality of instruction nor are they uniformly enthusiastic about accepting the responsibility that accompanies that influence.

In these comments, I will suggest the most important challenge community college administrators face during the remainder of this decade is to restore to their academic programs some of the credibility that has been lost as a result of the simultaneous pursuit of too many peripheral activities with too few resources. Whether we like it or not, there are public perceptions of diminished quality arising from our excessive concern with numbers as the most important measure of institutional achievement. And these perceptions do not appear significantly altered by public relations programs resting on the historic but tenuous assumption that our problems would disappear if we could somehow get people to understand us better. It may well be that they understand us to well for our own good already.

It seems we have exhausted the benefits to be derived from gimmicks and self proclamations of excellence. It is time to be about the serious business of providing the leadership for quality that the public expects and our students need. A national report and recent research offer clues for administrators interested in taking on this challenge.

Most of you are familiar with Involvement In Learning, the report of the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education. Of the 20 recommendations addressed to institutions offering undergraduate instruction, no less than 13 have primary implications for administrators. Beyond emphasizing the centrality of administrators to efforts aimed at improving the quality of the learning process, a number of recommendations identify strategies of special promise. These include:

-design learning technologies to increase not reduce interaction between faculty and students.

-offer systematic programs of guidance and advisement that reach all student and involve as participants administrators, faculty, peer counselors and student affairs personnel.
-provide fiscal support, space and recognition to existing co curricular activities to maximize student involvement.
-consolidate as many part-time teaching lines as possible into full-time positions.
-determine the knowledge, capacities and skills students should have before graduation and make certain the content and delivery of the curriculum matches them.
-Assess the knowledge, capacities and skills developed by students through a systematic program.
-Use reward systems to place particular emphasis on teaching effectiveness.

I have selected these recommendations for emphasis because they coincide closely with some of the insights gained from research projects I have led over the past six years. For three years, beginning in 1979, our research team studied one urban community college district in all of its phases of activity. Our conclusions :"Determined administrative leadership that knows where it wants to go ... through control of the resource allocation process and a judicious blending of other strategies available to administrators can make significant progress toward achieving change even in a limited period of time..."(Richardson et al.,1982).

But change is not neutral, nor is it necessarily beneficial. And most of the decisions made by administrators in the Richfield District focused on activities ancillary to the teaching and learning process. Perhaps even more problematic, decisions in areas not perceived by administrators to be related to the educational program often had unforeseen and unintended impact in the classrooms. In the Richfield District, the pseudonym we gave our study site, we found that over an 18 month period only 2% of the decisions made by the Chancellors Executive Council, the key decision making body, were concerned with instruction or the curriculum.

There were, of course, other district committees to which responsibilities for instructional issues were delegated. But the senior decision making body in the district did not perceive its responsibilities to be concerned very centrally with the core learning activities of its constituent colleges. Despite the absence of agenda items dealing with instruction, the decisions taken by the Executive Council had important consequences for teaching and learning . And these consequences most commonly went unnoticed in the absence of direct involvement of administrators in the teaching and learning process.

An example will illustrate this point. One priority that did occupy a prominent place in many executive council discussions was the need to recruit more non traditional students to improve revenues derived from the district's enrollment driven funding formula. During our study, the district placed substantial emphasis on marketing activities with some considerable success. But many of the students who came in response to the marketing emphasis on new clientele lacked the necessary academic preparation to participate effectively in any of the courses that were available when they were recruited. Because the Richfield District had given little attention to its assessment and placement procedures prior to recruiting its new clientele, many ended up in traditional collegiate courses where their limited preparation adversely influenced the educational experiences of better prepared students as well as limiting their own chances for success.

The decision to market an institution's programs is frequently seen as a fiscal issue, but no decision in the Richfield District during our study had greater implications for the educational program. In fact one central finding focused on the impact of large numbers of under prepared students on the standards and required activities in the courses we observed. We saw few examples of students reading or writing connected prose. Instead we watched instructors transmit content through methods that emphasized fragments of information students were expected to recognize on multiple choice examinations.

Faced with large numbers of students who were unwilling or unable to participate in the forms of reading and writing traditionally associated with college teaching; and confronted by administrative values defining "good instructors" as those who helped students succeed regardless of prior preparation; faculty members adapted in the only way possible, by finding ways of teaching content without requiring students to engage in the forms of reading and writing ordinarily associated with collegiate learning.

Put another way, business faculty members knew how to teach business law; they didn't know how to teach reading and writing. Unfortunately, teaching business law to students who couldn't or wouldn't engage in much reading or writing could only be done through methods that fostered dependence on the instructor rather than independence of the student in the learning process. In effect we saw faculty members giving students fish rather than teaching them how to fish.

Because the design of our study was interactive, that is to say we shared what we learned with Richfield administrators on a regular basis throughout the study, the observations I've reported were part of the Richfield information base

long before they were described in our 1983 Jossey-Bass book on Literacy in the Open Access College. And we saw many changes on the campus we studied that represented effective responses to the information we reported. But administrators who sat on the district executive council, while not disagreeing with our findings, did not seem to view the information with much concern. We learned that if you want to watch administrators' eyes glaze, talk to them about literacy. Most of them had not taught a lower division class in many years. Teaching the new clientele, so zealously recruited, was for them a distant experience.

Richfield administrators and many of their administrative colleagues around the country were unhappy with the book we wrote describing what we saw. Predictably, their reactions closely paralleled the classic response described by Cohen (In Vaughan,1983,p160). First, the study was wrong because in their institution it was different. Second, Even if the study was correct, it should not have been published because it reflected adversely on community colleges in general and thus gave ammunition to those who might wish them ill. And finally, even if the study was correct it wasn't their fault.

The reactions of community college faculty members to the book have contrasted sharply with their administrative colleagues. Faculty have said, "are you sure the study wasn't done in this institution?", and "we need to make faculty and administrators aware that this is happening in other institutions as well as ours". And finally they have added, "This is an important issue that should concern everyone who is committed to the community college concept".

The reaction of administrators when confronted with questions about current practice was very much in keeping with community college tradition. I'd like to tell you a story that illustrates this point.

In April of 1964 as dean of students in the fledgling St Louis community college district, I had the privilege of attending at the University of Chicago what must surely have been the most illustrious assemblage of scholars and practitioners to meet on issues related to the community college to that point in time. The research conference, organized by Max Raines to consider the need for improving student personnel programs, included such luminaries as T.R. McConnell, Ralph Berdie, Robert Havighurst, Lee Medsker, Ed Gleazer, E. G. Williamson, Joe Kauffman, and many others whose names you would recognize. It was pretty heady stuff for a newly minted PhD.

During our three days of meetings, I mentioned several times the concern I felt about the under prepared students who were showing up in large numbers on our Forest Park Campus. I even suggested we had the responsibility either to

structure an appropriate program to serve them or to stop admitting them. You see I was a troublemaker even in those days.

To understand the seriousness of my statement requires a little background. It was an act of faith among community college leaders that anyone who attended a community college was significantly altered for the better, regardless of how short or how unsatisfactory their tenure, The concept was roughly analogous to baptism. And the accepted method of saving souls, educationally speaking, was through providing students with the right to fail, a practice at which we had become particularly adept at Forest Park. In fact within a year, the St Louis Globe Democrat was to report on its front page "Half The Students at the Community College Failing, Flunking Out" in response to statistics obtained from a dissident faculty member whose statistics, unfortunately, were a lot more reliable than his motives.

Shortly after returning to St Louis, I was summoned to Joe Cosand's office, the District President. For a dean of students this was an extremely unusual occurrence. Joe, who had not been in Chicago, started by asking me what I thought about the meeting. Ignoring the somewhat formal way he asked the question, I waxed enthusiastic. After listening to me in his normal relaxed and patient manner for approximately 24 seconds he interrupted, "Lee Medsker says he doesn't think you are a community college person". He went on to detail some of my transgressions at the meeting as these had been reported to him by Lee.

From this experience, which seemed very much like boot camp in the Marine Corps; you're glad it happened but you wouldn't want to do it again; I learned an important lesson about the rules that govern our movement and the sanctions applied to those who transgress them. That's the good news; the bad news is that some think I did it all over again with the literacy book.

The aspect of Literacy in the Open Access College that has proven most troublesome for many administrators has been our conclusions in the final chapter that administrators must accept primary responsibility for the fact that an institution established to level up disadvantaged segments of the population has in practice experienced much of its success through lowering the standards expected from those who participate. This is a harsh judgment but one that seemed to us to be supported by the classroom behavior we observed and the administrative decisions to which that behavior could be traced.

Among the decisions that contributed to deterioration in program quality from our observations:

-Permitting students to register for courses without

ensuring that they had the prerequisite skills.

-Keeping students eligible for financial aid through liberal interpretations of the regulations and easy withdrawal policies.

-Refusing to set priorities within the educational program under conditions of fiscal constraint.

-Equating a college education with sale priced consumer goods by hawking it in shopping centers and on billboards.

-Labeling courses to maximize funding potential rather than to communicate educational intent and level of difficulty.

-Dropping course prerequisites to increase class size.

-Failing to evaluate outcomes other than the generation of reimbursable credit hours.

-Excessive use of part-time faculty without making adequate provisions for student advisement and orientation.

-Permitting students to register as late as the third week of classes to bolster enrollments for reimbursement purposes.

Have administrators generally supported these kinds of decisions in community colleges? And do they have detrimental effects on the quality of instruction? Find out for yourselves. If you have not already done so, try convening some of your more concerned and outspoken faculty members on the topic of quality in the teaching and learning process and how it can be most effectively promoted in the community college setting without jeopardizing access.

In effect this is what I have been doing for the last two years under the terms of a Ford Foundation grant to examine progress to the bachelor's degree for minority students who attend urban community colleges. In addition to talking to faculty members and administrators in community colleges, the design of our study calls for similar conversations with their counterparts in the adjacent public universities to which the majority of their students transfer.

One of the questions we asked was whether equivalent demands were placed on students in university and community college classes designed to meet the same objectives. With few exceptions, faculty members in both settings said there was less rigor in the community college classes. One community college chemistry instructor elaborated, "we use the same textbook but we cover fewer topics and we cover them in less depth". A survey of students transferring from the urban community colleges in our study to their adjacent universities confirmed that students shared the perceptions of faculty members. While praising their community colleges for their supportive environments and concerned staffs, their responses and attached comments made it clear that if you wanted courses pegged at an appropriate level of difficulty, the place to go was the university. As in our literacy study, administrators in community colleges seemed either unaware of the issue or unwilling to acknowledge it.

In the fall of 1984, full-time students declined nationally by 7.3% in public two-year colleges while part-time enrollments continued to advance. You know the results in Illinois. The community college's love affair with the mythical average student, 29 years of age, enrolled in a single class and not interested in earning a degree has come full circle. And in the process there has developed a widening gap between the credibility of university and community college academic efforts. We were told by some of those we interviewed in the Ford project that the "community college was not viewed as a place for serious students" And it was clear that students who had alternatives to attending a community college were exercising them in increasing numbers.

The traditional community college advantages of location and cost have been seriously eroded in urban areas by need based financial aid and the availability of public transportation. If administrators do not confront the quality issues head on, their colleges run the risk of losing the critical mass necessary for offering credible transfer programs. And with the loss of these programs may go as many as half of the remaining full time students.

What insights are available from the studies I've mentioned for administrators looking for practical implications? First it is clear that many of the practices I have described as contributing to public concerns about quality have been adopted in the name of preserving open access, even where the primary motivation has been to continue enrollment growth to preserve revenues. And just as patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel so is access the last refuge of those who would preserve current practice by equating all discussions of quality with closing the open door and by labeling those who introduce them as enemies of the community college movement. So we must get beyond defensive rhetoric to a serious study of how community colleges can provide open access and quality for I submit that the former without the latter is an empty promise.

Beyond opening their institutions to a serious discussion aimed at defining quality in teaching and learning in the open access college, administrators must make the attainment of quality a major priority. They can do this by:

-emphasizing assessment and mandatory placement as strategies for ensuring that a majority of the students in college level classes possess the skills necessary to allow the instructor to insist on appropriate standards of performance without causing unacceptable levels of attrition.

-finding out why students are attending before first registration and by ensuring that those with degree or transfer objectives receive high quality advising from their

first contact with the institution.

-defining exit competencies for such core areas as reading, mathematics and writing and by assessing students to ensure they have acquired those competencies by the time they are certified as having met their general education requirements.

-labeling courses designed to transfer appropriately and by limiting admission to such courses to students with the commensurate preparation and objectives.

-ensuring that information sent to secondary schools does not mislead the naive into believing that attending a community college can compensate for a poor high school preparation.

There are other institutional practices that might be mentioned. But you have been more than patient with the ramblings of a heretic. Let me close by emphasizing the central point of these remarks and by offering a final suggestion for action. Community college administrators have as their most important responsibility providing an environment where priority is given to defining, promoting and maintaining quality in teaching and learning. Yet they function under demands which frequently cause them to overlook the implications of their actions on quality.

The current environment requires engagement of the quality issue. Educational leadership in community colleges is firmly in the hands of administrators. I believe they will discharge this responsibility more intelligently if they borrow a page from their university colleagues and reassert their role as teachers. I am familiar with all of the arguments about why administrators cannot or should not teach. I once headed a community college where all administrators were expected to teach so you can imagine that in the five years before I reluctantly agreed to end the practice there were few arguments against the idea that went unexamined in our administrative council.

Despite the persuasiveness of my staff and my own capitulation, I believe that administrators can best confront their own biases and the results of their daily decisions by performing in the crucible of the classroom for at least one class each year. I cannot believe that administrators in the Richfield District could possibly have retained some of the assumptions they held about the learning experiences they were able to provide to their new clientele had they spent some of their time trying to teach them.

In the final analysis, teaching and learning are what community colleges are all about. And effective management, according to Keller, is at least as much a matter of doing the right things as doing things right. Community colleges have solved the access problem. Now the "right thing" involves making certain the quality of teaching and learning

fulfills the promise of access by altering in significant ways the life opportunities of those the community college touches.

One important way for administrators to prepare for this challenge is to renew their knowledge of student needs, capabilities and aspirations by returning to the classroom periodically. Who knows, It could be in the best interests of the community college concept if administrators for even a brief time saw themselves as teachers first and managers second.

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE
FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES
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